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ABSTRACT

A project was conducted to develop, monitor, and evaluate schemes for assessing the prior experiential learning of individuals enrolling in polytechnic institutes and colleges. A total of 12 evaluation schemes at 15 educational institutions throughout Great Britain were examined. The evaluation schemes studied had been developed to assess the prior learning of students enrolled in such courses of study as production engineering, business, social studies, computing and information technology, and mechanical engineering. Twelve of the schemes studied eventually became operational in 11 of the institutions. Assessment of prior learning was found to work best when the responsibility for demonstrating prior learning was placed with the student and when there were clear separations between experience as a source of learning and experience per se, identification and assessment of prior learning, and the academic functions of helping students prepare evidence of learning and assessing that learning. Four approaches to assessment were found to be successful--formally organized classes, tutorials, instruments and manuals, and interviews. The adult students whose prior learning was assessed used the information in a variety of ways, such as to obtain admission to degree courses, obtain employment, advance in their careers, change their career direction, or find contentment where they are. (Nine appendixes provide information on prior learning evaluation at six selected institutions plus suggestions for standardizing assessment information.) (MN)

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The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning

Report of a CNAA Development Fund project conducted at the Learning From Experience Trust

Norman Evans

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CNAA Development Services Publication 17

The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning

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Norman Evans

Preface

In this report, illustrations are given of effective practice arising from the work undertaken within a development project commissioned by CNAA in 1985. The project's origins predate the formal CNAA Development Fund, but in many respects the key concerns and ways of working adopted by the Development Fund Sub-Committee are represented in this work. This was an important piece of work, whose outcomes and future extension will be significant across higher education and for all those concerned with access to higher education.

The project was directed by Norman Evans, at the Learning from Experience Trust, but in essence the development undertaken has been on particular courses within higher education institutions. CNAA's resources have enabled Mr Evans to undertake fieldwork in polytechnics and colleges, acting as a facilitator and as an agent for development.

This report, together with a shorter *Briefing* publication, presents the findings and an evaluation of this fieldwork operation, together with a framework through which the work to date can be extended to other HE institutions and courses. In particular it is hoped that staff will find in the report ideas and techniques from the project's experience that will be helpful in developing and operating the courses with which they are involved.

Alan Crispin
Registrar for Development Services

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1. Preamble

This is the report of a major project supported by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) Development Fund from April 1985 to November 1987. Its objectives were to

'negotiate, establish, monitor and appraise schemes for the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) in polytechnics and colleges . . .'

For these purposes APEL refers to ways of making valid and reliable judgements about

'. . . the knowledge and skills acquired through life and work experience and study which are not formally attested through any educational or professional certification. It can include instruction-based learning, provided by any institution which has not been examined in any of the public examinations systems.'[1]

A few years ago to talk about the assessment of prior experiential learning was a new departure. Now discussion about APEL is part of a more general expression of thinking about the services available to older learners and ways of improving them. Interest in 'mature students' in post compulsory education has quickened. Student centred attitudes on the part of academic staff are often referred to as one of the best ways of serving 'mature students'.

At national policy level this interest in APEL is reflected in the 1987 White Paper.[2] It is central to the development of some of the initiatives taken by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). It is integral to the brief given to the newly established National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). These developments were preceded by, and it would be encouraging to think in part prompted by, the reports of working parties on continuing education of both the Universities Grants Committee (UGC)[3] and the National Advisory Body (NAB)[4] which were published in 1984. The UGC paper urged:

'that universities should consider, possibly on an area consortium basis, developing procedures for assessing learning by experience as a way for mature students to satisfy admissions requirements and to gain course remission'.

The NAB paper had a section, 'Credit Transfer, Modular Courses and Experiential Learning', giving a cogent exposition of why these developments were necessary and asserted:

'the potential of credit transfer, modular courses and the assessment of experiential learning in fostering the provision of continuing education is very great indeed'.

They made those recommendations in the context of their definitions of continuing education. The UGC said: 'any form of education, whether vocational or general, resumed after an interval following the end of continuous initial education.' NAB's definition was: 'any form of education undertaken after an interval following the end of initial education.'

Transformation from an abstract description into services available to the public means finding ways of getting a better relationship between opportunities for learning and the social, economic and domestic circumstances of individuals, which largely dictate the use which can be made of those opportunities. So the air is thick with talk about modular schemes, courses written to show learning outcomes, credit accumulation and transfer, progression, independent study and learning contracts, institutional organisation, and above all access.

This is the context for discussions of APEL. But APEL is concerned with a two-way version of access:— external access as opportunities for learning; and internal access to the knowledge and skills which people may have already acquired but do not know they possess, and which may prove significant academically if only they can be tapped. It is this which increasing numbers of staff and students find so stimulating about APEL.

This project is the successor to two previous projects on APEL. The Further Education Unit (FEU) commissioned a study which led to the publication of *Curriculum Opportunity* in 1983. CNAA funded a study which led to the publication in 1984 of *Access to Higher Education: non-standard entry to CNAA first degree and DipHE courses.*[5] Both those studies showed that, whereas there was nothing in the regulations of any award bearing course in further or higher education to prevent institutions using the assessment of prior experiential learning as evidence for admission or admission with advanced standing, no examples could be found where this was done systematically.

This project, which is concerned with higher education, was funded to attempt some systematic developments of APEL for access and admission with advanced standing within the normal institutional arrangements for maintaining academic standards.

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[1] *Curriculum Opportunity: a map of experiential learning in entry requirements to higher and further education award bearing courses.* (Further Education Unit, May 1983)
[2] *Higher Education: meeting the challenge* (HMSO, CM 114, April 1987)
[3] Report of the Continuing Education Working Party. (University Grants Committee, January 1984)
[4] Report of the Continuing Education Group. (National Advisory Body, August 1984)
[5] (CNAA, August 1984)

2. The brief and its evolution

The project was designed to negotiate, establish, monitor and appraise schemes for the assessment of prior experiential learning (APEL) in polytechnics and colleges. The courses selected were to cover as many of the main study areas as possible, including the DipHE, and disposed so as to give a reasonable geographical sample within England.

Each scheme was to develop procedures which would enable individual men and women who were technically unqualified to produce evidence of their uncertificated learning. Such evidence should enable admission tutors to decide whether or not to admit those individuals to the degree to which they had applied and, for both unqualified and qualified candidates, whether or not to grant admission with advanced standing.

The aim throughout was to stimulate action, sustain it, describe it, try to identify what appeared to be the most effective approaches to the assessment of prior experiential learning, identify significant problems and produce a report which might assist academic staff develop schemes which fitted their own circumstances and their own particular institution.

The original brief was to promote not fewer than 12 schemes in not fewer than six institutions and, wherever possible, to promote two schemes in each participating institution. Full-time and part-time courses were to be included.

Things have not worked out quite like that. In all 15 schemes in 12 institutions were discussed extensively, but eventually only 12 of the schemes became operational in 11 of the institutions. (*see Table 1*) One of those schemes is at Master's level, and a DipHE scheme is incorporated in a combined studies degree scheme. Regrettably mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology are not represented. In each institution attempts were made to enlist these subject departments. They failed because of various combinations of staff shortages, student numbers and recruitment problems. In only two institutions has it proved possible to promote separate schemes in more than one discipline. This has been compensated for to some extent through the APEL schemes at Newcastle upon Tyne, Middlesex and Thames Polytechnics and the Polytechnic of North London, acting as routes towards courses in many different disciplines.

More significantly, partially under the influence of the developments referred to in the Preamble, part-time courses feature prominently. And it has turned out that admission with advanced standing came to mean the award of exemptions and/or academic credit. For APEL in the future this is likely to be more important than straightforward admission.

A further factor has emerged. Given the opportunity to articulate for themselves their current learning attainments, adults make use of that information about themselves in a variety of ways. Some use it as in the brief for the project, to obtain admission to degree courses. However, others use this evidence of their prior learning to obtain employment, for career advancement, for changing career direction or for finding contentment as and where they are.

Table 1

The list of participating institutions and the courses which have developed schemes for APEL is as follows:

City of Birmingham Polytechnic	production engineering (p/t) and business studies (p/t)
Bristol Polytechnic	business studies (p/t)
Essex Institute of Higher Education	MEd (p/t)
Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic	associate student scheme
Polytechnic of North London	evening degree (p/t)
Sheffield City Polytechnic	social studies (p/t) and business studies (p/t)
Stockport College of Technology	mechanical engineering (p/t)
The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton	computing and information technology (p/t and f/t)
Middlesex Polytechnic	modular degree scheme (p/t and f/t)
Thames Polytechnic	continuing education

What then has happened since the project work began in April 1985?

3. Setting it up

The polytechnics and colleges

The first task was to recruit participating institutions. Since this project was a natural successor to the CNAA's 'non standard entry' project, the first group came from those institutions which had shown strong interest in the assessment of prior experiential learning—Bristol, Middlesex, North East London, and Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnics and Stockport College of Technology. The second three came from following up indications of interest—the City of Birmingham, North London and Sheffield City Polytechnics. The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton and Liverpool Polytechnic offered to join in, and the Essex Institute of Higher Education joined in later, although conversations about its MEd course had gone on over a couple of years. Save for Middlesex Polytechnic and the Polytechnic of North London (PNL) it was the work of the project which initiated APEL developments in these institutions. PNL had made a tentative beginning in 1984 as part of the development of its evening degree, and in the same year Middlesex Polytechnic undertook to try out APEL from the office of the admissions tutor for the modular degree scheme.

Developments at Thames Polytechnic were different. Through the Policy Studies Institute, with financial support from the Wates Foundation and in collaboration with Goldsmiths' College of the University of London, Thames launched Making Experience Count (MEC) in 1983, which was the first attempt to conduct APEL in Britain. Throughout, the project was able to draw on that valuable early experience.

In each case commitment to participate followed thorough consultations at directorate level and with key members of staff who would be involved with the work. These discussions developed into prolonged negotiations about ways and means, including the incorporation of APEL work within the institutions' committee procedures. In every case, institutional participation was agreed only when it was clear that the directorate understood, accepted and supported the enterprise and that the staff to be involved held posts which enabled them not only to devise schemes but to put them into practice. There were no reluctant participants. There was marked enthusiasm, though unfortunately neither North East London Polytechnic nor Liverpool Polytechnic were finally able to participate for various operational reasons.

The areas of study

The institutional context and the areas of study identified came from discussions with the institutions' directorates. In the City of Birmingham Polytechnic the Faculty of Engineering had long experience of a part-time degree with an HND entry and wanted to find reliable and valid ways of admitting experienced engineers without that qualification. The part-time business studies degree staff wanted to find ways of making full use of the provisions for awarding academic credit.

At Bristol Polytechnic discussions for the 'non standard entry' project revealed that each year's entry included people with considerable learning acquired from their experience, and there was a strong urge to give some recognition where appropriate. A second interest was to use the portfolio approach to the assessment of prior experiential learning to boost the confidence of those who enrolled, as an additional means of encouraging them to stay the course and improve the retention rate.

The Polytechnic of North London was already evolving ways of giving formal recognition and academic credit to students on the evening degree scheme who had records of satisfactory performance in a variety of formal courses, some leading to occupational qualifications, and wanted to find ways of extending those provisions to uncertificated learning.

At Sheffield City Polytechnic, a small project with experienced middle managers, in the National Coal Board as it then was, initiated through the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), suggested that there would be clear gains both for the polytechnic and individual older learners and employers in developing procedures for preparing portfolios of prior learning for admission to the part-time business studies degree. The social studies degree tutors were finding that some of their applicants displayed marked familiarity with parts of that degree course, and again it made sense to devise reliable and valid ways of enabling those applicants to present claims for academic credit.

At Stockport College of Technology the head of department wanted to pursue the possibilities offered in the assessment of prior learning with some of the applicants to the part-time production engineering degree, who came to the college largely as a result of collaboration with employers. In particular Stockport was interested in possibilities of awarding admission with advanced standing.

The Polytechnic at Wolverhampton had a computer science honours degree sandwich course offering students a mixed mode range of study, moving from full-time to part-time and vice versa. For experienced employees with computing work experience APEL offered an additional opportunity and incentive to enrol.

At Thames Polytechnic the Continuing Education Unit offered MEC for access-type students, more women than men, and successfully helped some of its members enrol for degrees in the polytechnic.

Middlesex Polytechnic on the other hand had for some time been awarding academic credit retrospectively towards the DipHE and the combined humanities degree for students already enrolled on the course, in respect of

other formal qualifications. It extended those practices to include the assessment of prior experiential learning.

At Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic, the 'associate student scheme' was developed to provide opportunities for men and women to study at certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate levels on a part-time basis, in combinations of disciplines and with workloads adjusted to fit their circumstances. So APEL was not related to any predetermined study areas. It could be related to any appropriate course, selected by the associate student.

Essex Institute of Higher Education is different. About the time this project began there were long discussions about finding acceptable ways of admitting non-graduates to the MEd course. This arose because the course tutor was convinced that among the non-graduate applicants there were some who were more knowledgeable and more likely to cope with the course than some of the graduate applicants. After protracted negotiations with CNAA a scheme was devised and now the story can be told here.

4. Managing the project

Each of the schemes has been based on extensive discussions and planning by the academic member of staff responsible in the institution and the project director. Throughout the project visits, letters and frequent phone calls have linked each scheme with the project director. During the project there have been three full-day consultations attended by academic staff from all the schemes.

These contacts have been strengthened, indeed underpinned, in three other ways. Through the Scholar Exchange Scheme funded by the WK Kellogg Foundation through the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, Columbia, Maryland, it has been possible to arrange for at least one member of the staff team involved from each institution to participate in a week-long intensive study tour of American colleges and universities. These study tours are arranged to give British colleagues direct opportunities of investigating at first hand procedures for the assessment of prior learning as practised in the USA. Since the project director arranges these tours personally and accompanies each group of four or five, the opportunities for prosecuting issues relating to this project have been rich and productive all round.

This transatlantic connection, especially with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, has helped in another way. The Learning from Experience Trust has arranged for a number of Americans with substantial experience of APEL procedures to lead seminars in London for staff undertaking APEL developments, and to visit several of the participating institutions as consultants, seminar leaders and for general staff discussions.

Another means of promoting the work of this project for four institutions has come through negotiating additional projects involving the assessment of prior learning in which staff time has been 'bought' to facilitate the developments being sought. Newcastle's 'associate student scheme' was funded jointly by the DES and MSC and it incorporates the assessment of prior experiential learning. Birmingham and Sheffield City Polytechnics have been funded through a 'manuals project' which the MSC financed first through PSI and later LET, specifically to devise instruments for assessing prior learning in business studies and mechanical engineering. Wolverhampton and Sheffield City Polytechnics are part of a 'learning contracts scheme', which again raises questions of the assessment of prior learning. And in each of these cases, money has been used to create staff time to do the work required.

Additionally, through meetings of the Experiential Learning Network, and more recently through regional activities promoted in association with the Learning from Experience Trust, the institutions and the staff concerned have stayed in fairly close contact. All this has meant that as each scheme has evolved according to the particular circumstances of its parent institution, the course and its applicants, there have been continual conversations and consultations about developments.

More formally, the first consultation meeting for academic staff from all the participating institutions agreed on the headings for an information sheet which has served as an *aide memoire* and reference point throughout. (*see Appendix 1*)

5. Some guiding principles

APEL is one means among many of enabling older students to make maximum use of the opportunities available to them for learning. It is based on certain principles.

1. The student makes the claim

For APEL the most important guiding principle throughout is that it is the student or applicant who is making claims to have acquired knowledge and skills. It follows that the responsibility rests with the student for making a claim and supporting the claim with appropriate evidence. That is not to say that many applicants or students do not need considerable help in preparing those things and in understanding what might be sensible claims to make, but it is vital to recognise where the prime responsibility lies.

2. Learning not experience

The insistence throughout must be that the experience of a student is significant only as a source of learning. The intellectual task of moving from a description of experience to an identification of the learning derived from that experience is demanding. But if it cannot be accomplished there is no learning to assess, however important to the individual that experience may have been.

3. Identification comes before assessment

A third guiding principle is that there is a clear separation between the identification of prior learning and organising it into forms fit for presenting for assessment, and the assessment itself. The identification of prior learning comes through systematic reflection on experience. And there are three stages within that.

First: The scrutiny of experiences to select those where something was learned.

Second: The writing of clear statements about what was actually learned.

Third: The collection and collation of evidence to support the statements of what was learned.

Only then can there be assessment for accreditation.

4. Assessment and academic responsibility

Academic assessment is the responsibility solely of academic staff. This is the fourth guiding principle. It is open to staff to employ any procedure they think most appropriate to arrive at an academic judgement about the evidence of prior learning submitted, and to ensure the maintenance of academic standards.

5. The nature of evidence

The fifth guiding principle concerns the nature of evidence submitted for assessment. As with all academic assessments the method of assessment needs to be appropriate for what is being assessed. Hence academic staff may choose to rely on the written evidence submitted. They may decide to probe through an interview either in person or on the phone. They may require additional work assignments to be completed, sometimes related to specified readings. They may examine artefacts. They may observe performance. Whatever manner of assessment is used, it must be such that the judgement made can be considered by external examiners and boards of examiners alongside and with the same degree of confidence as other more traditionally assessed performances such as formal examination results.

6. Two academic functions

As a general rule and as a sixth guiding principle, it is wise to separate the two academic functions of helping students prepare evidence of learning and assessing that learning. In other words staff who help students prepare evidence should not have any part in making academic judgements about that evidence. The simple point here is to avoid confusion between advocate and judge.

6. Some students who undertook APEL

Engineering

A 25-year-old man undertook APEL at City of Birmingham Polytechnic, using the manual. He had CSE passes in mathematics (1), English language (3), English literature (2), geography (1), French (3), physics (3), metalwork (1). He had GCE 'O' level passes in history (C) and engineering workshop practice (C). At the end of his EITB 'approved motor vehicle apprenticeship' with Land Rover he was awarded the City and Guilds Full Technological Certificate in motor vehicle engineering. He worked for two years as a fitter tester and then moved on to become a development engineer with experience in the fields of vehicle compliance, feasibility exercises, competitive vehicle analysis, fuel systems, production and pre-production quality auditing. He had attended a number of two- or three-day courses on fuel injection systems, vehicle recovery techniques, computer keyboard skills, management and personnel planning. He plays a lot of sport and is also a keen musician who plays the piano and most wind instruments.

On the basis of his portfolio he was admitted to the BEng (Hons) degree course. (*see page 10, Birmingham.*)

Information and library studies

A woman of 48 applied to the 'associate student scheme' at Newcastle Polytechnic. She had no formal educational qualifications but she did have a broad range of work experience from clerk/secretarial to personnel assistant roles in a variety of contexts, from researcher to librarian/information officer and information consultant. She had attended various inservice training courses in proof-reading, editing, report-writing, medical information, constitutional writing, conference organising, statistics, information studies, but none of this was at a recognisable higher education level.

Having gone through the 'making your experience count' series of workshops she is now studying units in the BA Information and Library Studies degree course and seeking credit for relevant aspects of her prior learning. (*see page 9, Newcastle.*)

Teacher education

A woman in her late 30s applied to the Essex Institute of Higher Education's MEd preparation course and was admitted to the MEd course on the basis of her prior learning.

She had failed to get into university and went to a teacher training college but found the teaching on their BA course boring and turgid and took a teaching certificate instead, vowing never to take an examination again. She taught in primary school for five years before leaving to have a family. Five years later she decided she needed a degree to return to full-time employment and enrolled for an Open University arts BA. She returned to primary teaching and took a certificate in primary language development, an OU course in educational management and short courses in PE, mathematics and music.

Her lack of honours and diploma level qualifications seems to have been due to chance, poor teaching and low academic and career aspirations. Characteristically, therefore, she describes the effect of the MEd preparation course as an increase in her personal confidence. (*see page 10, Essex.*)

Business studies

A man aged 33 chose to prepare a portfolio of prior learning following the manuals to gain admission to the BTEC HNC business studies course at Sheffield City Polytechnic. He felt this course was most suitable for him initially, would enable him to gain a qualification in two years, and would serve to provide exemption if he chose later to seek entry to the part-time degree in business studies.

He left school at 14, without qualifications, to work in his father's butcher's shop. After one year he went to work in a jewellery shop as a sales assistant and remained in the jewellery trade for six years, the last two as manager of a retail shop. Because of inadequate financial rewards he left to go into the steel industry on the shop floor. He rapidly became the 'leading hand' in a crew of three and refused further promotion, since he had plenty of autonomy and adequate financial reward in the position he held. After nine years in the steel industry, he developed industrial deafness and after a further two years was made redundant in January 1987.

He felt the need to gain some qualification in business studies which might allow him to re-enter business at a reasonable level or help him in the retail business which he might set up. In view of his 'stale' business experience and lack of any recent academic work, he was not confident of taking a course. Nor would he have been likely to gain admission to a part-time degree or certificate course without some prior preparation, for example an HNC conversion course or an access course.

His portfolio was evaluated in July 1987, and he has been admitted to the BTEC HNC course in business studies. The evaluators described his portfolio as 'well-written' and demonstrating the necessary numeracy, literacy and communication skills. (*see page 11, Sheffield.*)

7. Approaches to the identification of prior learning

All the approaches described are based on the guiding principles set out above. The way they are applied differs. Some comments on those differences appear below, under the title 'Appraisal: the variables'.

The approaches adopted fall into four groups.

A. Students can work together in a *group* or in a *formally organised class*.

B. The work can be done through *tutorials*.

C. It can be done using *instruments and manuals* devised for the purpose.

D. The identification of prior learning can be done through *interview*.

A. Class or group work

Class or group work is particularly valuable for men and women who have a general sense that further study is what they want but are not entirely clear about what to study, or what they want to do with it. For many, working with a group of fellow students is encouraging, supportive and helps them see more clearly what they wish to do with their futures and gives them greater confidence in making decisions about what to do next. Usually they are encouraged to produce written accounts of what they claim to have learnt from their experience with evidence to support their claims. This is often referred to as a portfolio.

For the tutor it means acting as a facilitator, a supporter, an encourager and adviser and, most importantly, handling group discussions so that students can learn from one another. Obviously, this approach to the identification of prior experiential learning requires considerable commitment of staff time.

Thames Polytechnic organises its Making Experience Count (MEC) course as a timetabled class meeting for 33 weeks for three hours each week. This is an open recruitment course advertised through the continuing education unit's distribution of leaflets and pamphlets and through a shop in a busy precinct run by the Greenwich educational training advice service. The course takes as its content the life and work experience of its students. Themes such as childhood, schooling, and organising are used to stimulate reflection on experience. Considerable written work is required as take home assignments. Students are encouraged to compile a portfolio of learning as they go along. General discussions are supplemented by individual tutorials. The general thrust of MEC is towards enabling students to make informed choices about their futures, which for some include applying to higher education.

At Newcastle Polytechnic applicants to the 'associate student scheme' are given the opportunity of joining a series of eight evening workshop sessions designed to enable them to prepare a learning autobiography. Under the title of *Making Your Experience Count: portfolio workshop*, this provision serves two purposes. It enables individuals to make more reliable decisions about the degree programme they wish to pursue. For those who are clear about their course of study, it enables them to concentrate on preparing evidence of learning in defined fields.

For students who do not choose to join the portfolio classes, in a less formal way Newcastle Polytechnic will use its interviews to determine suitability for admission for non-standard entry applicants and, in some cases, to establish grounds for allowing study to begin beyond the foundation stage.

A pamphlet is available which explains the various APEL opportunities open for students. (*see Appendix 2*)

Bristol Polytechnic. In each of the two previous accounts, while the accent has been on group work, individual tutorials have featured. At Bristol the emphasis is the other way round. Applicants without standard entrance qualifications to the part-time degree in business studies are interviewed long and thoroughly using the critical incident approach to try and determine whether they are able to cope with the course. Five years of part-time study is a considerable undertaking. By definition most of the applicants are in full-time employment. So the learning from experience which they bring with them has a multiple significance in relation to the overriding responsibility of the course tutor to ensure that academic standards are maintained and that his course remains viable in terms of numbers of students. Interviews were tacitly the first of a series of tutorials. Weekend workshops were offered as a group activity to non-standard entry applicants to give them opportunities of realising what they had indeed learned from experience, and to gain confidence as they considered what they had to study on the course. For those who wished, it was also the first stage of compiling a learning portfolio while they were actually enrolled and studying on the course, so as to amass evidence of learning which could gain them credit in respect of later parts of the course. So while the weekend workshops offered a group approach, carrying on from the initial interview, individual consultations were offered to support the preparation work while actually attending the part-time course.

A handout to students is available, which includes a diagram setting out the various stages to be undertaken in APEL. (*see Appendix 3*)

Essex Institute of Higher Education conducts its identification of prior learning as part of the admission procedure for the MEd course. It does this through the formal provision of an access course 'MEd Preparation and Professional Self-Appraisal'. The aim of that course is:

'to produce for each course member a portfolio of work which documents possession of a level of professional knowledge and awareness equivalent to that represented by a BEd Hons qualification (the basic formal entry qualification otherwise required for admission to the MEd).'

The access course is a series of seminars which work through a programme of set tasks organised to meet the aims of the course as just quoted. (*see Appendix 4*)

Students reflect on their teaching experience and on the various non-award bearing in-service courses they may have attended. They then articulate what they have learned and make direct connections with the tasks set. The emphasis is on group work during those sessions which is complemented by individual consultations when appropriate.

This access course, like the MEd itself, is open to professional educators in nursery schools, primary and secondary schools, FE and HE colleges, and also adult education, nursing education, police training, and social work education.

The MEd course is limited to 12 students. Six places were allocated to students entering the course via the access course route.

B. Tutorials

A tutorial approach is appropriate when students have a clearer sense of the academic claims they intend to make for their prior learning or are able to sharpen them fairly quickly. Other things being equal, it takes far less tutorial time.

The context of Middlesex Polytechnic's approach is important. The regulations of the DipHE and combined studies degrees within the modular scheme allow academic credit to be awarded retrospectively to students who are already enrolled and studying for a degree. So enrolled students are given the opportunity of seeking academic credit on the basis of experiential learning just as they are able to seek credit for formal qualification courses they may have completed before joining Middlesex Polytechnic.

The procedure works like this. The course tutor gives a general introduction to those students interested as a group. He then has a tutorial with each student to identify through discussion which areas of experience might lead to accounts of learning which could be eligible for academic credit. The student goes away with a general guidance sheet about how to do what is required. If they want it, students can have another tutorial discussion or two. A group meeting is arranged for all the students preparing their experiential learning for assessment as a final check point before final submissions are made. At every turn, as much responsibility as possible is put on the students with no more than the minimum staff involvement necessary.

At the City of Birmingham Polytechnic, the tutorial approach is used for business studies. All applicants to the part-time degree are briefed on the possibilities on offer. Individual consultations with a tutor explain to students how they need to prepare their accounts of experiential learning so as to demonstrate the way it matches the learning objectives of a particular course unit. A subject tutor is then allocated to help the student with the preparation of a portfolio so that data collection can be kept in line with the requirements for the particular course unit.

This is all set out in a briefing paper made available to students. (*see Appendix 5*)

Things work in more or less the same way at Sheffield City Polytechnic with the social studies degree. Where application papers list periods of employment or voluntary work which suggests to tutors that it might have led to the acquisition of knowledge and skills which could be eligible for academic credit, the applicant is told of the possibilities in relation to options at intermediate level, the requirements and the likely workload involved. On an individual basis detailed plans are then agreed about what areas of experience are going to be used as the source of learning, and the kind of evidence which will be produced. One formal tutorial is arranged to check progress and offer guidance. All this is timetabled so as to run from October/November to the following December, when submissions are due.

The Polytechnic of North London uses the tutorial approach in its evening degree scheme but adds another dimension. In the same way that applicants with evidence of successful completion of courses which have led to some formal qualification can gain academic credit towards the degree, so can experiential learning be considered. Advice on how to prepare submissions is given individually. Guidance is available to check progress. According to numbers showing interest, from time to time workshop sessions are arranged. And when they are ready students hand in their accounts of uncertificated learning.

These opportunities are first presented to applicants when they complete an application for the evening degree scheme. (*see Appendix 6*) However, as a result of interviewing for admissions the co-ordinator of the degree realised some applicants needed more help in preparing their portfolios of learning than the polytechnic could provide, in order to substantiate their applications for admission at all. And so the polytechnic arranged to refer to the North London College those kinds of applicants who would then get from the college the help they could not get from the polytechnic.

C. Instruments and manuals

Additional funding from the MSC enabled mechanical engineering and business studies to be tackled differently at Birmingham and Sheffield City Polytechnics respectively. The approach was to devise a set of performance statements which related both to the academic requirements of the course and to the appropriate occupation requirements in employment, and provide students with

a manual which would help them go through the process of scanning their experience, giving accounts of their learning and producing supporting evidence.

For City of Birmingham Polytechnic the process had to be designed for applicants seeking admission to the engineering degree who did not hold an HND, which up to this project had been an entry requirement. Having reviewed recently rejected applications from those without an HND, tutors worked out lists of performance requirements in mathematics, engineering language, comprehension and written expression. They then devised a series of practical exercises and reading suggestions, which led to a set of tests to be completed. So the manual became in effect a distance learning programme with sections on mathematics, engineering language, comprehension and written work. A tutorial set things going. Advice was available. Dates were set for submissions. (*see Appendix 7*)

Because Sheffield City Polytechnic was exploring ways of using systematic reflection on experience in relation to a company's staff appraisal systems, the manual devised for use by applicants for the part-time business studies degree was of a more general nature than that prepared for engineering applicants at Birmingham. It was organised in four parts. Parts one and two took students step by step through what was involved in the identification and documenting of prior learning. Each step had exercises for the student to complete with illustrations provided on an accompanying tape, recorded by a student who had been through the entire process. Part three then listed the performance statements with guidance about how to draw on work and life experience to produce evidence of learning achievements. Part four gave guidance on compiling a learning portfolio. As with Birmingham, a timetable for completion was laid down. Tutorials were available to check progress and give advice.

D. Interviews

Quite obviously, if it is possible to refine interviewing techniques so that tutors are able to identify significant prior learning, this is a cheaper, quicker and more simple approach. In each of the two cases which follow, assessment can occur simultaneously with identification.

At Stockport College of Technology the head of department for production engineering found that through careful and systematic interviewing for admission it is possible to identify likely areas of prior learning which might be creditable. Applicants on the part-time course tend to be recommended by their employers and have extensive work experience in some of the topic areas covered by the course. All 'non-standard entry' applicants are interviewed at the workplace by college staff. Close collaboration between college and employer frequently meant that the college can deduce from the work experience of applicants what they are likely to have accomplished as learning on the job. A phone call or two between college and supervisors in companies can supplement the interviews and provides sufficient reliable evidence for admission. In some cases that approach has proved strong *prima facie* evidence for admission with advance standing.

At The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton the context for using interviews for approaching the prior experiential learning of applicants to the computing and information technology degree is different. Staff of the faculty hold a series of 'open house' evenings during the year which are arranged specifically for people to explore what opportunities the polytechnic offers in computing and related study areas. This often means that, when applicants are considered formally for admission, they may already know a good deal about the content and structure of the course, and in turn they may well be known to the interviewing tutors, having met them at an 'open house' meeting.

Four other factors underlie the use of interviews for identifying prior experiential learning at Wolverhampton. The modular structure of the course, in relatively small units, means that investigations of prior learning can be sharply focussed. The content of each section enables tutors to form reliable judgements of an applicant's expertise in any of the study areas covered by the course. The interviewing tutors have always had experience of teaching a wide range of the units in the course. And interviews are conducted by pairs of tutors. In these ways reliable and valid academic judgements can be made about the credit-worthiness of applicants' prior learning.

8. Approaches to assessment

Just as there can be a wide variety of approaches to the identification of prior experiential learning, so there are different approaches to its formal assessment.

Self-assessment

Systematic reflection on experience lies at the heart of any APEL scheme. Frequently this means that students undertaking APEL develop a fuller understanding of themselves, their capacities, their strengths and weaknesses, and often they change their minds about what they want to do in the future and so about the area of study they may wish to undertake. Tacitly there is a self-assessment being conducted by individuals whatever approach to APEL is followed. This means that self-assessment by students is likely to be the forerunner of any formal assessment. Indeed part of that self-assessment is often the decision as to whether or not to go for formal assessment at all.

Formal assessments

Broadly speaking there are three approaches to formal assessment which have been used by participating institutions:

A. Variations on conventional procedures;
B. Interview and performance observation; and
C. Interviewing.

Thames, Newcastle, Sheffield, Birmingham, Bristol, Middlesex, Polytechnic of North London and Essex all used their customary approaches though with individual variations. And these were based on the clear separation of the two academic roles, facilitator and assessor. Stockport used performance observation as a complement to interview. Wolverhampton relied on interview alone. In these last two cases there was not such division between facilitator and assessor.

A. Conventional procedures with variations

Thames Polytechnic. Portfolios are submitted to admission tutors who are asked to take them as evidence to support an application for admission. Applicants are then interviewed. In most cases the admission tutor consults the course tutor for Making Experience Count. The admission tutor makes the decision. This is the procedure followed for admission to courses which are within Thames Polytechnic.

Where students from MEC apply for admission to courses in other institutions the same procedure is followed.

It is important to note, however, that in both cases arrangements have been made in advance through extensive briefing and discussion to ensure that admission tutors are willing and able to receive portfolios and deal with them in this fashion.

There have been no cases where a portfolio has led to admission with advanced standing.

Newcastle Polytechnic uses evidence of prior learning from interview as a basis for the admission of non-standard applicants to the 'associate student scheme' for entry to post-foundation study. The preparation of portfolios of prior learning is intended to enable students to claim academic credit.

Credit for prior learning may be claimed before or during a programme of study at any point up to that at which the programme is registered for a qualification (this may be at any time before 50% of the necessary credit is earned). This makes the process a little protracted, but allows students to work at their own pace and reserve a number of options.

Assessment is conducted in the conventional way. Portfolios are submitted to selected subject specialists. Generally they are read by a second member of academic staff. Assessments are followed by formal recommendations for academic credit to the board of studies for the associate degree scheme and are therefore subject to the scrutiny of external examiners.

In this way assessments of prior learning are incorporated in the formal academic procedures of the institution.

As with Thames Polytechnic, there was extensive briefing of admission tutors beforehand. This is particularly important at Newcastle because the 'associate student scheme' offers routes towards many of the degree courses offered by the polytechnic.

Sheffield City Polytechnic. In business studies academic staff set out to use the evidence of learning offered in portfolios as a basis for making decisions about admission and for credit or exemption. A timetable laid down the dates by which portfolios had to be submitted so that their assessments are incorporated in the annual cycle of examining board meetings and decisions by admission tutors.

Two tutors evaluated each portfolio. For a specific credit at least one of the evaluators was the relevant subject specialist.

For access, and possibly for general credit, appropriate course tutors were involved in the evaluation. Each panel of two normally consisted of the appropriate specialist tutor and a member of staff who had acted as an advisor but, and this reflects one of the guiding principles, no advisor took part in evaluating the portfolio of any person he had assisted in the portfolio preparation.

Evaluators were briefed on the process and on the nature of the evaluation as set out in the guidelines. (*see Appendix 8*)

In the social studies degree course at Sheffield the aim was to use evidence of prior learning as a means of awarding academic credit either to those joining the course or those already on it. The preparation of evidence was related to requirements of components in the course.

The portfolio of evidence was prepared through tutorials given by academic staff teaching the course. This evidence culminated in a project which was then marked by internal assessors and external examiners, and their recommendations were made to the examination board.

City of Birmingham Polytechnic. Course tutors in mechanical engineering set out to use the evidence produced in the portfolio for admission purposes only.

A timetable set out dates for submission of portfolios which synchronised with the normal rhythm of decisions of admission tutors. There were consultations between the tutor responsible for the portfolio preparation scheme and the admission tutor but the decision was taken by the admission tutor alone.

At the autumn term meeting of the board of studies for mechanical engineering, enrolments for the current year are reviewed. This means that board members are fully aware of the assessment procedures which have allowed entry to the degree course via the assessment of prior learning. Similarly external examiners are aware of those students admitted by APEL.

Caution on the part of the relevant CNAA committee meant it was not possible for admission with advanced standing to be offered as an opportunity to students already on the course. Had this facility been available all assessments would have been conducted by internal and external examiners who would have made recommendation to the board of examiners.

In business studies at City of Birmingham Polytechnic the evidence presented in a portfolio was considered for the award of academic credit towards the completion of the degree.

The portfolio was presented at a panel interview for evaluation. The panel was composed of the subject tutor, an independent assessor and the course director or a representative. Decisions about academic credit made by that panel were then taken as recommendations to the examining board.

Bristol Polytechnic drew the evidence to be used for the assessment of prior learning from the critical incident interviews, complemented where necessary with literacy and numeracy tests. Assessments were made separately by the course tutor and the appropriate subject tutor who conducted his own interviews with students seeking academic credit. This was assessment for academic credit and/or exemption.

The validity of the decisions on admission with exemption or credit was ensured first through using two academic assessors and second through assimilating assessments of prior learning to the normal internal academic procedures for examining laid out as requirements for conduct of the degree course.

Middlesex Polytechnic's assessment procedure was established through the formal adoption by the appropriate board of studies of a formal paper: *Assessment of Prior Learning for Accreditation.* (*see Appendix 9*)

A set of criteria was devised to guide assessors:

- authenticity: that the student really did what is claimed in the proposal;
- directness: that the focus of learning was sharp rather than diffused;
- breadth: that the learning was not isolated from wider consideration;
- quality: that the learning had reached an acceptable academic level; and
- currency: that the student had kept up to date with recent developments.

The first step towards final assessment was for all the assessors to meet with the co-ordinating tutor to discuss the criteria. Although by that time the assessors had received the proposals, as Middlesex Polytechnic calls its submissions from students for prior learning, the essential purpose of that first meeting was to clarify the criteria.

This is an essential point about the polytechnic's assessment procedures because of the range of proposals which can be considered at any one time. A random selection of proposal titles makes this clear:

- manager of estate agent's office for four years; knowledge of housing law, marketing, office management;
- Israeli dance, extensive teaching and choreography;
- extensive experience in the Department of Health and Social Security, plus counselling for a voluntary agency;
- fund raiser and project organiser for major conservation agency, 10 years' involvement.
- Edwardian society, and access project.

There are two assessors for each proposal. Assessors read the proposals and conduct a joint half hour *viva voce* with each student. They are free to set questions requiring written answers or to test the acquisition of skills. This was rarely necessary, though it is worth noting that for dance proposals a wide range of evidence was accepted including both live and videotaped performance.

The assessors then make a short written report on each proposal and in all cases finished with a recommendation for the amount of credit to be awarded.

The Polytechnic of North London is concerned essen-

tially with evidence of previous learning which might command academic credit. The framing of the entry regulations means that the assessment procedure begins with the application forms themselves. Forms are considered in two phases. Those that pass an initial screening by the degree scheme office are sent directly to subject tutors who interview the students and make a decision on admission and programmes to be followed and make recommendations for credit exemptions.

Recommendations from tutors are then assembled in the co-ordinator's office and submitted for formal approval to the scheme's student programme committee. This provides the opportunity for awarding credit for optional units in addition to those necessarily tied to subject requirements.

Students wishing to claim additional credit seek an appointment with the co-ordinator to establish the feasibility and subject areas. Further tutorials may then follow to consider a draft of the claim to be made. The completed portfolio is then sent to a subject tutor for assessment. Recommendations to the student programme committee then follow, in the normal way.

Essex Institute of Higher Education under-girded its assessment procedures by devising a set of criteria designed to enable academic colleagues, who had not been involved in planning or teaching the access course (but who had experience of marking BEd honours dissertations), to decide whether the portfolios of prior learning demonstrated an equivalence to a BEd honours dissertation, since the function of the portfolio is to document a BEd honours level of attainment.

These criteria were:

(i) ability to identify and define a feasible and appropriate research project;
(ii) ability to critically review available literature pertinent to the chosen topic;
(iii) ability to relate theoretical insights to the professional concerns of his/her school/college;
(iv) ability to select, develop and implement an appropriate research strategy;
(v) facility with research methods appropriate to the chosen research strategy;
(vi) appreciation of the strengths and limitations of the chosen methodology;
(vii) capacity to analyse and interpret research data;
(viii) preparedness to evaluate objectively the research endeavour;
(ix) standards of written presentation characterised by clarity of expression, logical consistency and the structuring of material within a clear organisational framework; and
(x) ability to explicate, elaborate and defend orally the dissertation.

B. Interviews and performance observation

Stockport College of Technology. The normal entry to the course is via a Higher National Certificate or Diploma in engineering, during which certain subjects must be studied. Applicants not meeting the laid down entry criteria are interviewed by a team of college staff who make recommendations based on formal learning and experiential learning. The initial assessments by individual subject specialists are collated and subjected to scrutiny via the course team. The prospective student may be asked to provide documentary evidence to substantiate the information provided at the interview. Tutors made judgements by comparing the knowledge and skills candidates reveal with the content of courses completed by applicants with the normal entry requirements.

The next stage in the assessment procedure is an interview at the place of employment in which a minimum of two members of the college staff, together with the immediate supervisor of the student, discuss the full course structure with the student.

Additionally, where a candidate's learning from experience suggests that course requirements have been met already, as in industrial design for example, an on-site performance observation by a tutor is the assessment tool used.

The experience to date, limited though it is, is that the employer wishes to work very closely with the college and endeavours to determine a staff development programme of short courses that will be undertaken during the four-year duration of the course and which may be able to be offset against elements within the course. One example of this is in the field of computer aided engineering which is an integral part of the course and which can be 'learned' outside of the formal structure but within the time scale of the course.

Academic standards are guarded in three ways. The offer of a place on the course may involve the student undertaking a small amount of bridging study prior to the start of the course. Once a place is accepted the student is allocated a tutor who stays with that student throughout the course and so is monitoring all the arrangements referred to. And the external examiner is kept informed of all these procedures, and students' results.

C. Interviewing

The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton. In information technology and computing, assessments of prior learning are made largely in relation to admission with advanced standing. As described under 'Approaches adopted towards the identification of prior learning', assessments are made at and through interviews. Pairs of tutors conduct interviews and make assessments. This is possible because of the modular structure of the course, the content of each unit of the course and the experience of the tutors in teaching a wide range of units of the course.

The assessments made are then considered by the examination board along with all other results within the degree programme. External examiners, therefore, are an automatic part of the scrutiny of the assessments of prior learning.

9. What the students did

In all 147 students, 73 men and 74 women across an age range of 22 to 65, have undertaken APEL in the 12 schemes offered by the 10 institutions. These students' results demonstrate the validity of some of the variables.

The experience of APEL led some students to change their minds about what they wanted to do next. It boosted their confidence to the point when doing something different became achievable. This is the significance of those students at Newcastle, Sheffield and Thames Polytechnics, who went into employment and not into degree study. The number of withdrawals illustrates another variable. A change in domestic circumstances or in employment can easily mean that men and women have simply not sufficient time to complete their APEL work. For most who were clear about their intentions as in business studies, engineering, computing and information technology and social science, the figures show most were able to advance along their chosen path and some moved a good way along it.

Table 2: **1985–1987**

Institution	*Degree*	*Number of APEL*	*Age range of students*	*Male/ female ratio*	*Number awarded admission*	*Number awarded exemption/ credit*
Bristol Polytechnic	Business studies p/t	14	25–47	11/3	12	2
City of Birmingham Polytechnic	Business studies p/t	5	25–39	3/2	4	1
City of Birmingham Polytechnic	Engineering f/t	7	25–38	2/–	2	—
Essex Institute of HE	MEd p/t	10	26–49	5/5	10	—
Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic	Associate student scheme	19	22–55	8/11	6	9
Polytechnic of North London	Evening degree	Entry regulations facilitate 40 per cent from a total entry of 250 a year being awarded some credit or exemption				
Sheffield City Polytechnic	Social sciences p/t	7	—	–/4	5	2
Sheffield City Polytechnic	Business studies f/t & p/t	8	25–32	3/5	4	1
Stockport College of Technology	Engineering p/t	4	25–40	2/2	2	2
Middlesex Polytechnic	Combined studies f/t & p/t	15 16	23–47	12/19	—	31
Thames Polytechnic	Entry to polytechnic degree	30	20–65	7/23	7= 5 Humanities 2 Sociology	others to polyprep
The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton	Computing and information technology f/t & p/t	6 11	20–35	11/–	6 11	—

Summary of APEL students by discipline

Business studies = 27

Computing and information technology = 17

Continuing education = 75

Engineering = 11

MEd = 10

Social sciences = 7

10. Evaluation: the brief and its execution

The project has fulfilled its purposes in most respects but not all. Mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology do not feature, and nor do building and surveying. So the coverage of the academic curriculum in higher education is incomplete. Nor do full-time courses feature as prominently as was intended. Only two of the participating institutions developed two schemes. The number of participants is smaller than was anticipated.

In other respects intentions have been realised. APEL has been conducted across a range of disciplines, variously for admission and for awarding exemptions and credit. This report contains a significant range of evidence of different approaches to the identification of prior learning, different approaches to its assessment, and different uses being made of it in a variety of different contexts. They have all been put to the test and validated because of the way the procedures of APEL are integrated with an institution's academic arrangements and examination procedures. In no sense can an accusing finger be pointed at evidence threatening the overriding responsibility of the CNAA and its associated institutions for maintaining academic standards.

Most importantly the project has clarified some of the issues raised in relation to the assessment of prior and experiential learning. Methodological issues, assessment issues, curricular issues, institutional issues, issues concerned with regulations and cost factors, as well as the implications for staff development, all these can now be seen more clearly and form the substantial part of this evaluation section.

However, this evaluation is in the context of comparatively small numbers of students. The overall number of students involved is not as great as was anticipated. This is a consequence of a combination of factors.

1. The vagaries of institutional funding and the stream of missives from the NAB and the DES have heavily increased administration. All this had an underestimated effect on tutorial loads and hence limited the amount of staff time which could be devoted to the development of schemes and, most important, to advertising them and recruiting to them.

2. The change in relationships between CNAA itself and its related institutions, stemming from its document *Future Strategy: principles and operation* (February 1987), has also affected the workload for institutions.

3. Economic and social circumstances of older students have put a premium on part-time study, but correspondingly part-time students are the very ones who cannot afford time to work at the preparation of prior learning required unless there is a clear dividend in sight. And sometimes it was not. Some part-time students who were initially attracted to the possibilities offered through prior learning assessment then realised that the degree regulations sometimes made it impossible for them to shorten the course—ie to complete it faster—despite the possibility of them gaining academic credit. For many part-time students it became the question—in which case why bother?

11. Variables affecting the characteristics of any APEL scheme

The assessment of prior learning is best seen as a service to individuals, based on systematic reflection on their experience. Everything stems from that whatever institutional or academic issues may arise.

It emerges that there are five sets of variables in any system for the assessment of prior learning.

(i) The *initial interest* of the individual which will range from the general as in the 'associate student scheme' within the recurrent education provision at Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic to the highly specific as in production engineering in Birmingham.

(ii) The *evolving purpose* of an individual, which could include deciding against further study, seeking employment, engaging in polyprep or access, admission or admission with advanced standing.

(iii) The *characteristics of the discipline* or area of study concerned and its institutional context.

(iv) The *institutional structure* and organisation of courses and curricula.

(v) *Appropriate approaches* to the identification and assessment of prior learning ranging from seminar/group discussion to take-home study pack materials are governed by (i) to (iv).

Given that the assessment of prior learning is a service to individuals and that all procedures are based on systematic reflection on experience, there is necessarily a strong element of self-assessment for any individual participant. The significance of the fifth variable, therefore, lies substantially in the amount of education guidance and counselling that any individual seeks or needs. Those older students who are clear that further study makes sense for them, but are not entirely clear about the area of study they will undertake or their eventual occupational or personal intention, tend to make extensive use of tutors' help and guidance in combination with their own better understandings through self-assessment.

Group provision is one obvious way of meeting these students' needs. However, it is often the case that students equipped with take-home learning packages use tutorials for these 'direction finding' purposes.

This educational and guidance dimension to the assessment of prior learning is all the more important because it is often the case that students tend to change their minds about appropriate areas of study and career and personal intentions during the preparation of their statements of prior learning through which they come to understand themselves better. This point relates to the second variable.

The third variable becomes self-evident from a scrutiny of the different approaches to the identification of prior learning demonstrated across the participating institutions in a previous section. Engineering and computing and information technology adopt a different approach from that appropriate for the humanities. There are three business studies courses featuring in this project. Each adopted a different approach.

The fourth variable is a matter of institutional policy concerning modular structure, and of academic policy concerning the inclusion of learning outcomes in course descriptions. Where an institution's academic provision is based on a unit or modular organisation, the assessment of prior learning is easier to handle than where courses are organised in large sections. This is obvious. And it is particularly important where the assessment of prior learning is conducted by comparing it with the content of formally taught courses. So in some ways modularisation or a unit structure is a facilitator for the assessment of prior learning.

Assessment of prior learning obviously can be greatly facilitated where courses are written in terms of learning outcomes because such statements serve as the basic instrument for assessment. The example of City of Birmingham Polytechnic's mechanical engineering course is notable. Faced with the question as to how tutors there could make decisions, about admission with advanced standing in particular, but also for admission in general, they decided to rewrite their courses in terms of learning outcomes for this very reason.

So the evidence is clear. The approach adopted is governed by a combination of the interests of individual participants, the characteristics of a discipline, the way the course is organised and the perception tutors have of it within their particular institutional context.

12. Differences between disciplines

The size of the sample is not large enough to make statements supported by statistical evidence, but nevertheless it is possible to make some general comments.

Business studies

It is instructive to consider the three different schemes in business studies. At Bristol Polytechnic formal assessment of APEL occurred only for those who were already enrolled on the course and were seeking academic credit so that they could complete the course more quickly. Formal assessment was not part of the admission procedure despite the fact that considerable weight was put on prior experiential learning as revealed during the admission interviews. The emphasis at Sheffield City Polytechnic was different. For new applicants formal assessment of prior experiential learning preceded admission for the course and was either for admission or admission with advanced standing. Formal assessment was also offered to enrolled students as a means of getting exemptions. At City of Birmingham Polytechnic the accent is on admission with advanced standing.

Correspondingly, the approach to the identification of prior experiential learning varies between the three. The early stages at Bristol and Sheffield are diagnostic: goodness of fit between applicant and course, as much for the benefit of the individual applicant as for admission tutors. Only subsequently is the focus sharpened on prior learning for potential credit, if an individual seeks it. At Birmingham the focus is sharp from the beginning and posing the question, 'Does this applicant meet the requirements of this particular unit of study and so merit academic credit?' These variations reflect different views about the purpose of helping individuals identify their prior learning. All are valid. But they all indicate how the context of degree course and institution dictate different approaches and, most important, different clientele in their respective areas.

Mechanical engineering

Something similar can be seen in considering the two pilot projects in mechanical engineering. Stockport College of Technology has a steady number of applicants who are sent by their employers to join the degree course so recruitment via APEL is not a prime interest. For City of Birmingham Polytechnic it is. Added to which the additional funding for the development of the manual in Birmingham produced a thorough going approach, incorporating systematically diagnostic probes and tuition assistance to get up to scratch. Stockport relied on interview supported by close contacts with candidates' employers. Furthermore it appears that regulations facilitate admission with advanced standing at Stockport whereas they inhibit this at Birmingham.

Social studies and the humanities

For social studies at Sheffield City Polytechnic and the assessment in different disciplines at Newcastle, Middlesex and Thames Polytechnics and the Polytechnic of North London, arising from their general provision, the responsibility for making assessments rests with tutors in the various disciplines to determine whether the requirements for admission or for credit, and so admission with advanced standing, are met or not. In some cases, as with business studies in Birmingham, this is course-related. In other cases it is the making of judgements about conceptual grasp and understanding rather than content coverage, which is the basis of the assessment.

Computing and information technology

Methodologically, computing and information technology at The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton is the most striking of all schemes. At Wolverhampton identification of prior learning and its assessment occur simultaneously and at interview. The section on page 11 explains how this is done.

13. Involving the students

As with all learning and teaching, everything depends on the respective perceptions of learner and teacher. This is especially important for the identification of prior learning and its eventual assessment, because the learner has already acquired the knowledge and skill which is waiting to be revealed and the tutor's task is to help the learner reveal it. It follows that there is an infinite number of approaches which can work according to the chemical mix of learner and tutor. The sections in this report which describe the different approaches make this clear.

For example:

A. Group sessions or tutorials. A typical conversation opening can go like this:

Tutor: *'So you've worked for so many years in this field. What did you learn?'*
Student: *'I gained insights of all sorts.'*
Tutor: *'What specific insights did you gain?'*
Student: *'Well, all sorts of insights, you know . . . valuable insights.'*

This kind of discussion can easily lead to the student expressing surprise at how much had clearly been learnt from work experience.

Students can be invited to consider the difference between the practitioner pure and simple and the practitioner who reflects on the theory underpinning his or her work—to consider how a reflective person might gain greater understanding in six months than an unreflective person in six years. A specific example could be offered contrasting an unreflective practitioner, who might have achieved a high degree of competence, with a reflective practitioner. The latter might be less competent in day-to-day operations, but involved in the theoretical debates, more aware of the relevant literature, and reflective on the connections between work and wider social, economic or political considerations.

Subsequently, in a group, students can present an outline of their prior learning experience and receive comments from other members. Alternatively, this can be done in an individual tutorial. The requirement to present a draft proposal to fellow students at an early stage can serve as a useful stimulus to involvement in the programme. Later formal presentations can take the form of a progress report from each student.

Going through these stages can take as little as a few weeks, with only a few hours of tutorial time, or it can take 10-12 weeks as an organised course. It all depends on the balance of the variables.

B. A manual. This is simply a text which tries to help students go through the same stages. The extract below comes from Sheffield City Polytechnic's 'Manual for business studies':

So you want to build on your experience?

- *Do you have several years' experience since leaving school?*
- *Do you feel you would like to take a course at the polytechnic, but despite your experience haven't got the necessary entry qualifications?*

  Perhaps you're wondering whether you are up to it?

  Or even whether your experience would entitle you to exemption from subjects, or 'credits'?

- *Do you think you've got what it takes to go further in your career or job, but feel the need to prove it—to yourself and/or your employer?*
- *Do you think this would be a better basis on which to plan your future development and training?*

If so, this manual is for you!

It is designed to enable you to:

- identify the learning which you have gained from your past experience at work or elsewhere;
- put this into a form in which it can be recognised and assessed by your employer, course admissions tutors and others and so receive due credit for it.

The manual takes you through the stages involved in doing this.

- In preparing a portfolio of prior learning you are concerned only with *past* experience, from which you already learnt something.

You will be asking yourself:

- *What have I learnt from my past experience?*
- *What have my experiences taught me?*

Or, to be more specific:

- *What* **knowledge** *have I acquired;*
- *What* **skills** *have I mastered;*
- *How have my judgements and my feelings changed as a result of living through the events of my past life?*

If you feel that your experience is worth something, and you wish others to recognise that it is, then these are the questions you need to answer. The answers

which you give will reveal the nature and level of your learning.

Remember, it is your learning that counts—not the scope, breadth and duration of your experience.

City of Birmingham Polytechnic's 'Manual for engineering' got down to details, for the reasons given earlier.

Mechanical engineering

Prior experience

Experience on its own is of little value unless, as a result of the experience, learning has taken place. Consequently this section of the portfolio is concerned, primarily, with the *learning* which has occurred as a result of your experiences.

In order that this primary objective can be achieved, the following procedures should be followed:

Identify your experiences

The following is a list, by no means comprehensive, which may help you to identify your past experiences. Please do not rely on this list alone, but reflect on *your* life experiences in the preparation of this part of the portfolio.

1. Formal academic qualifications.

   Date of qualification.
   Actual qualification—to include GCE 'O' and 'A' levels, ONC/OND, HNC/HND, BTEC, OU, university, professional qualifications, City and Guilds, others.
   Indication of degree of success.

2. Attendance on short courses.

   Date(s) of attendance.
   Course length.
   Subject area(s) studied.
   Degree of expertise/competence gained.

3. In-house training.

   Comments as in 2.

4. Correspondence courses.

   Comments as in 2.

5. EITB training.

   Comments as in 2.

6. Apprenticeship(s) served.

   Date(s) of apprenticeship(s).
   Type of apprenticeship.
   Length of apprenticeship.
   Practical abilities achieved.
   Academic qualifications obtained.
   Position achieved after completion of apprenticeship.
   Exemptions from EA1/2.

7. Industrial experience.

   Positions held—length of time.
   Experience gained in areas such as:
   - Engineering and related areas.
   - Business management.
   - Accountancy.
   - Trade union activities.
   - General managerial skills.
   - Inspection.
   - Metrology.
   - Report-writing.
   - Computing techniques.
   - New manufacturing technologies.
   - Economics.
   - Design, including knowledge of modern systems.
   - Electrical/electronic engineering.
   - Draughting skills.
   - Specialist knowledge in subject areas in BEng course.

   If possible seek to identify (refer to course leaflet):
   - Communication skills.
   - Numeracy.
   - Work study.
   - Creative ability.
   - Knowledge of patent law.

8. Hobbies and other interests.

Identify the learning which has resulted from these experiences

The experiences recalled from the previous section will, in many instances, have produced a learning experience. The next stage therefore is to attempt to accurately define these learning experiences.

Considerable care is required in this exercise, since it is not only necessary to define that which was learnt, but to identify the level at which the learning took place. These levels of learning have been researched by many people, but the most common method of describing the learning level is that proposed in Bloom's Taxonomy.

Using this method you will need to distinguish between, for example, the difference in learning processes which result in a person:

- *describing* a hydraulic circuit;
- *comprehending* how the circuit works;
- *designing* a hydraulic circuit;
- *evaluating* different types of hydraulic circuits.

Verify the learning which has occurred

Verification of the learning experience may occur in several ways. These may include the following:

- **as a result of confirmation, by a superior from your place of employment;**
- **by the submission of documentation which details the type of work which produced the learning;**
- **by being prepared to be interviewed by appropriate staff from the polytechnic, or external advisers;**
- **as a result of being set some form of written/ practical assessment.**

Whatever the approach whether in a group, in tutorials or through a manual to be used for distance learning, it will be based on:

***systematic reflection* on experience for significant learning;**

***identification* of significant learning, expressed in precise statements, constituting claims to the possession of knowledge and skills;**

***synthesis* of evidence to support the claims made to knowledge and skills;**

***assessment* for accreditation.**

For students there are two essential requirements: a purpose which suits them, and some indication of the amount of work involved. (*see Variables, section 11*)

It is desirable to clarify the purpose of APEL for each individual student as quickly as possible. As in business studies at City of Birmingham Polytechnic and in the evening degree at PNL, the purpose can be stated directly in course leaflets or as a handout to enrolled students. Similarly any candidate seeking admission with exemption or credit in any subject has a clear purpose. In those cases the student workload is fairly clear, though often the problem is to prevent students doing too much preparation work.

Where APEL is offered as a general facility for entry to degree courses as at Newcastle Polytechnic, it is harder to establish clear purpose and hence estimate the workload involved. Somehow, students have to be helped to select from their experience those areas which might, on reflection, reveal knowledge and skill which relates to their chosen field of study. But there is a continual danger of purpose being unclear, with an uncertain workload and a consequent risk of frustration and discouragement. All this can best be accommodated within group sessions organised as a formal class for a prescribed number of weeks.

Whatever approaches are adopted, however, students need a timetable for the completion and submission of statements of their prior learning which will be adhered to as strictly as for any other academic work.

14. Involving the staff

The major factors for staff are workload and attitudes.

There is the amount of time spent with students. Work with APEL can lead some students into enormous amounts of work as they delve into their experiences. They get fascinated by it. This can result in some wanting to make disproportionate demands on tutors' time. Clarity of purpose, and a timetable which will be adhered to, can help tutors keep all this within reasonable bounds.

Similarly, when students begin to document and synthesise the evidence they would use to support their claims to prior learning, without strong guidance they can amass more material than is strictly necessary, and thus they may present tutors with a daunting task. Obviously, this is more likely to occur within a general provision for APEL, rather than a precisely related connection with course content. In any case staff are best served by issuing clear guidelines to students about their submissions of prior learning. This is particularly important for staff who undertake the assessment of prior learning, given the two staff roles referred to under Guiding Principles. (*see section 5*)

There is, however, an entirely different dimension to the workload of staff in APEL. Clearly it is irresponsible to launch any APEL scheme without being assured that the academic colleagues who will be asked to assess the prior learning are fully briefed on the nature of the undertaking and support it. When APEL is being conducted entirely within a faculty such as computer and information technology at The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton, or mechanical engineering at City of Birmingham Polytechnic, that is relatively straightforward. Unless the head of faculty has approved the initiative in the first place, there would be no APEL. But it is an entirely different matter in, say, Newcastle Polytechnic or PNL. In those institutions tutors responsible for initiating schemes for the identification of prior learning have to do considerable preparatory work with colleagues in a variety of academic disciplines to make sure that, as required, assessments will be conducted. And that can take a great deal of time.

Then there are attitudes, personal and academic. For APEL there are no rights and wrongs; there are differences. There can be a different academic relationship between a tutor and student engaged in APEL and a tutor teaching students in a timetabled class. Some tutors feel easy and secure in both, or in one and not in the other. Put another way, not all tutors would either wish to be involved in APEL nor be best fitted to undertake it. These differences must be respected.

As with institutions and students, therefore, staff need to assess what they are letting themselves in for.

15. Assessments

Assessing experiential learning is one thing. Grading it for a classified degree result is another. Beyond admission, assessment remains straightforward where the regulations speak of exemptions, so that APEL is a means of a student leap-frogging into a later part of the course. It is also straightforward where regulations contain provision for options and/or where the classified degree results are based on grades awarded to a given number of course units or modules completed and not on every course studied. In those cases grading is unnecessary.

Where APEL leads to the award of academic credit which counts towards the award, however, some means has to be found of grading that result so that it can be integrated in the final declaration of a classified degree. The general view of the academics involved in this project is that this need present no problem. Since apart from options the credit must be awarded in relation to a specified part of the course. APEL can be treated for grading as a course work assignment or as an independent study.

These matters have an important bearing on the acceptance of APEL by professional bodies as discussed under Issues. (*see section 18*)

16. APEL as catalyst

This section needs to be read with caution. It may be no more than a sign of the times and that developments would have occurred anyway, but it is notable that in some institutions where APEL has been introduced through the project other things have happened as well.

It is reasonable to ask whether the rewriting of a mechanical engineering degree to include learning outcomes would have happened without the stimulus of APEL.

Would a faculty board have had written for it, let alone adopted, a paper on accreditation which was based on APEL and stood as a strategy for seeking closer collaboration with industry and commerce?

Would an 'associate student scheme' have made as much progress internally or obtained validation under an institutional agreement without APEL as a significant dimension?

Would an institution be planning along federal lines its relationships with further education to incorporate APEL as a deliberate strategy—for attracting students from a more heterogeneous background, and with especial attention being paid to the unemployed—would this be happening without an APEL initiative which engaged staff and students?

Without the stimulus of APEL would an access to technology course have been launched with no stipulations about mathematics and physics and recruited handsomely?

Maybe APEL and this project are incidental. The coincidences are worth noting.

More narrowly, staff in the participating institutions have remarked that the introduction of APEL has stimulated thinking about course design and led to a greater awareness of the significant possibilities of access and credit. In one polytechnic APEL became a tool for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of all students admitted onto the course, so that specific help could be given where necessary. In another APEL produced such good results that it is being introduced as a course requirement.

In one other way APEL can have a strong catalytic influence. The point recurs in the institutional issues section which follows but it merits a separate entry.

APEL raises many questions about older students and what institutions offer them. It is almost invariable that tutors engaged in APEL are critical of ways of treating older students as if they were older versions of the 18-plus. What older students want to learn, how they can best learn it, where and when they wish to learn it, these are all questions which emerge almost inevitably through APEL. Since these are questions of increasing significance for institutions of higher education, it is another way of claiming that APEL can serve everyone well.

17. The best buy

What works best in APEL are procedures which are simple, quick and cheap. This is equally true for staff and students. Where students are clear about what they want, the experience at The Polytechnic, Wolverhampton in computing and information technology is instructive. It works there because the degree structure is modular, because of the content of the modular units and last because pairs of interviewers who are familiar with all parts of the course work act as a self-checking academic mechanism. Middlesex Polytechnic is equally instructive. The quick-fire approach of two or three group meetings, plus one or two tutorials, works because students know what they want and can be held to deadlines.

Another approach which has not been tried systematically is the 'challenge' examination. A student making a particular claim could both challenge the course and be challenged by a course through sitting an examination designed to test the validity of the claim.

In theory all those factors can apply to all courses and many applicants as well, except for the obvious problem of dealing with the content of some courses. What follows is a rudimentary instrument for students to try to get at this issue.

Assessment of prior learning

If you wish prior learning to be assessed with a view to either (*a*) *exceptional entry to a course* or (*b*) *obtaining credit towards a qualification* then please give a preliminary outline of your existing learning under any or all of the headings below.

1. **Work experience—please list skills you have mastered or learning you have achieved as a result of your employment. (This includes in-service courses.)**

2. **Leisure pursuits from which you have added to your learning, eg membership of societies and/or clubs, service on committees, attendance at courses on topics of interest.**

3. **Formal qualifications—list any qualifications obtained at school or subsequently, giving dates.**

Beyond attempts to streamline procedures the missing link is to know how far interviews could be conducted in the social sciences and the humanities, for example, to produce reliable evidence of prior learning and valid assessments of it.

18. Issues arising

Curricular issues

The fundamental curricular issue is the implication of giving academic recognition to knowledge and skills acquired without any reference to the academic staff or institution awarding that recognition.

Apart from regulations, which feature in a later section, this raises questions about the content of courses and the relationship between what is offered to students as additional learning and the learning they bring with them. Do existing courses fit the bill? It also poses questions about how adult students learn. Time and again discussions with tutors engaged in the assessment of prior learning dwell on these issues.

One particular focus of these discussions is the transition for older students, from the style of learning inherent in systematic reflection on experience before they enrol on a degree course, to the style of learning students find frequently in formal courses. A second focus for these discussions is when academic staff reflect on ways of integrating employer provision for learning, either in-house or commissioned from outside, and on-the-job learning which is a form of prior learning, with courses leading to a formal qualification. And this of course is especially significant in relation to part-time courses. Newcastle, Sheffield and Wolverhampton Polytechnics are confronting these issues, as they work out the consequences of incorporating the assessment of prior learning in their academic provision.

APEL as a validated course

The intellectual demands which have to be met by students undertaking APEL are considerable. In the view of the academic staff who have been working with students on APEL during this project, those intellectual demands are no less than those made on students studying undergraduate courses. There would appear to be no academic reason, therefore, why a timetabled course should not be offered as a formal part of a degree programme. In many degrees such as Newcastle, Middlesex and PNL it could be incorporated as an option. In others it could become part of a foundation stage. The City of Birmingham Polytechnic experience in engineering and Essex Institute of Higher Education's in the MEd are highly suggestive of its potential value.

The self-assessment aspect of APEL suggests that within modular degree programmes it could benefit students and tutors alike in helping to sort out the most appropriate degree programme. The direct benefit to students, however, is that they could gain academic credit towards the degree by completing an APEL class satisfactorily. Then, if they wished, they could seek further academic credit by submitting their prior learning for formal assessment.

Quite apart from anything else this could solve one of the resource questions. A formal class is part of an institution's fully-funded provision.

Professional bodies

APEL does no service to students if their degree studies do not provide ready access, for those who want it, to professional qualifications awarded by professional institutes and associations. It was this concern which in part caused problems with the mechanical engineering degree at City of Birmingham Polytechnic. Given the academic validity and reliability which can be achieved through APEL, it follows that it is of paramount importance that discussions between CNAA and professional bodies should be opened about APEL.

As with the academic community, trials and pilot projects need to be mounted to produce evidence on which considered judgements can be made about the validity and reliability of APEL in relation to professional qualifications.

Institutional issues

Against that curricular background APEL can be seen as a strategic tool for institutional development. This indeed is what is happening at Newcastle and Wolverhampton Polytechnics and in a different way at Sheffield City Polytechnic. The reasoning goes as follows. Continuing education is moving towards mainstream activity. Increasingly collaboration with employers is the core of continuing education itself. Association with neighbouring institutions is a mechanism for enhancing the service on offer generally and an institution's finances. APEL procedures applied across a range of different interest groups, whether drawn from unemployment, full-time employment or any form of study in further or higher education, can thus become a vehicle for developing and extending the services an institution offers.

Similarly APEL becomes a mechanism for evolving schemes of credit accumulation and transfer within and across institutions, and thus making operational the concept of progression. It can lead to a view of access as 'access to assessment'.

A further issue arises, though it is more speculative, from the experience of the education guidance dimension to the assessment of prior learning. APEL can become one means for individuals to get a compass bearing on their future development and so a place where they can work out how best to make use of the various courses an institution has to offer them. This is where APEL is placed within continuing education, as with the Newcastle Polytechnic 'associate student scheme' and PNL's evening degree programme, and to a lesser extent at Middlesex, Thames and at Wolverhampton Polytechnic where APEL is being considered as a major element in institutional development. Clearly this has implications

for the administrative role of those providing APEL and the resources required.

This also begins to raise a more general question about admission. With prior learning drawing on a variety of sources of learning external to an institution, and on a complexity of offerings within institutions as their academic organisation becomes increasingly modular, APEL is beginning to look like one component of a 'student support service'—which is available to facilitate the entry of students to an institution, supports and guides them while they are studying, and helps them to move on to the next stage after they have finished studying through the career service. In an ideal world such a strong central student services unit would have organic links with admission tutors, so that neither student services nor admissions could act independently.

There is a further institutional matter to mention in the evaluation of this project. It can be stated baldly. Leadership. The origin of the project, the recruitment of the participating institutions and the evolution of the project make it absolutely clear that the successful introduction of APEL in an institution depends substantially on support from the directorate. Given the potential implications of APEL the undertaking is irresponsible without that support. The stakes are too high for students and academic staff alike for there to be any risk of selling anyone short.

Resource issues

It is impossible to make hard and fast comments about the amount of time and so the money involved. The institutions and their individual courses showed practices which vary so much. But some general comments can be made.

Where APEL is conducted through a formal class there is a straightforward staff/student ratio calculation, though how that class is funded varies from a continuing education provision to a local arrangement with a further education college.

Where APEL is more or less on an individual basis a number of calculations have emerged. In one institution 30 hours, or say two weeks full-time work of a senior lecturer, have been allocated to deal with APEL from start to finish, excluding the assessment. In another a total of 44 hours has been allocated for tutorials during the academic year to help the students prepare their claims to uncertificated learning. Both of these examples are within a single discipline.

Where APEL is a general provision and so involves a number of academic staff in different disciplines, in one institution it is calculated that 180 hours in the year, or say the equivalent of one term's full-time work, is needed to cover the work of the students and staff for, say, a dozen student candidates.

Where procedures are contained within interviews, there is some additional work, but it is disguised. Similarly, where tutorials are used, APEL is on a concealed overload.

In another case, even where development funds have been provided to launch a scheme, a faculty's rules mean that unless a group of 12 can be recruited no official provision can be made.

The fundamental question, however, about the establishment of prior learning assessment procedures is—to put it most crudely—'Can we afford it?' For as long as it is regarded as an extra the answer must be—'No—unless there is some pump-priming funding to support the initial development of a scheme.'

The evidence for this is clear. At both Birmingham and Sheffield Polytechnics modest amounts of additional funding (attracted from sources other than CNAA) bought staff time to design instruments for assessment with the implication that it would be cheaper in staff time next time round. That injection of additional staff time produced a ripple effect through involving other tutors which made the climate warmer, more conducive to the successful propagation of APEL schemes.

However, if economical ways can be developed of conducting APEL procedures so that it ceases to be viewed as an extra, then costs can be seen against a different range of factors. Recruitment, for example. If older students are able to shorten their part-time degree course, through being awarded academic credit for their prior learning, then an institution's fee income can rise through additional enrolments. Or retention. Withdrawal rates from some part-time courses are sometimes high. A combination of the personal boost of having uncertificated knowledge, and skills recognised for academic credit and being able to shorten the course, all these can provide powerful motivations for staying in the course rather than leaving it.

APEL can be a way of integrating on-the-job learning in employment with institutional-based study, which again can have significant financial implications within overall collaboration between institution and employers.

The initial problem is getting it going. It is notable that the most thorough going efforts to develop effective schemes for the assessment of prior learning have been in polytechnics at Newcastle, Sheffield and Birmingham, the three places where additional funding has bought staff time.

The example of the Polytechnic of North London's collaboration with the North London College and Sheffield City Polytechnic with the Sheffield Open College is worth noting for its cost implications. The portfolio preparation work undertaken by the North London College (with students seeking to use prior learning as evidence to support their application for admission to the evening degree scheme at PNL) was a cost borne by the college and not by the polytechnic. In other words collaboration between higher education and further education institutions under the general heading of access may offer ways of reducing overall costs of APEL

procedures for higher education. In Sheffield something similar is being explored by the Polytechnic and Open College.

Regulation issues

If the satisfactory deployment of APEL procedures depends on evolving economical ways of working, it also depends on regulations. The problems encountered by mechanical engineers at City of Birmingham Polytechnic exemplify the point. Quite early on in the discussions for establishing a scheme at Birmingham, it became obvious in the judgement of experienced tutors that it was quite likely that the evidence of prior learning would be strongest in relation to course units which occurred in years 3 and 4 of the part-time degree course, rather than years 1 and 2. Regulations, however, restricted the awarding of academic credit to the early parts of the course. Again at Bristol Polytechnic until the course was revalidated the part time business studies course there was similarly inhibited. Possibilities for awarding academic credit for APEL (admission with advanced standing) were restricted to early parts of the course. Social studies at Sheffield faced the same problem. APEL credit was limited to the intermediate level.

In other words, if the recognition of learning attainments, however acquired, is the fundamental premise on which the assessment of prior learning is based regulations, to be appropriate, similarly need to be based on the same premise. They need to be framed so that evidence of satisfactory attainment in relation to any and every part of a degree programme can be accredited whether at the beginning, in the middle or towards the end of a course. Regulations need to facilitate the evolution of access to become 'access to assessment'.

Staff development issues

Staff development has been an integral part of this project, as implied in the section on 'Managing the project'. Throughout its conduct there has been a continual chorus of agreement that staff development is essential. This is not because there is some mystery about approaches to the identification, assessment and accreditation of prior learning. After all the academic judgements used in the assessment of prior experiential learning are not fundamentally different from judgements used as a matter of routine in admitting students, marking their work and grading their examination results. Nor are they more subjective. It is simply that APEL introduces an additional way of viewing the acquisition of knowledge which can be assessed academically. Staff need some time and space to consider it. In many ways it is no more than an extension of the approaches so many staff have employed in teaching mature students. The essential difference is that APEL requires a systematic approach to the investigation of the experience older students bring with them as a potential source of learning. And that does require systematic preparation.

19. Concluding comments

APEL can offer an additional range of opportunities for learning to individuals and for institutional development to match the changing circumstances of the life and work experience of men and women in society. It raises searching questions about curricula (modular studies, learning outcomes, course design), about resources, about regulations, about the way in which institutions transact their business and within them, and above all, questions about staff development. It has left open the whole range of questions about the relationship between APEL and professional qualifications. This is an increasingly urgent matter which must be tackled.

Whatever developments in APEL institutions choose to attempt in the future will reflect their own particular circumstances (*see Variables, Section 11*), but they will do well to reflect on the guiding principles. Every development though is bound to be governed by resources and cash. Now that APEL has been tried and tested in eleven institutions this is where further work is needed. It is especially necessary in work with mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology.

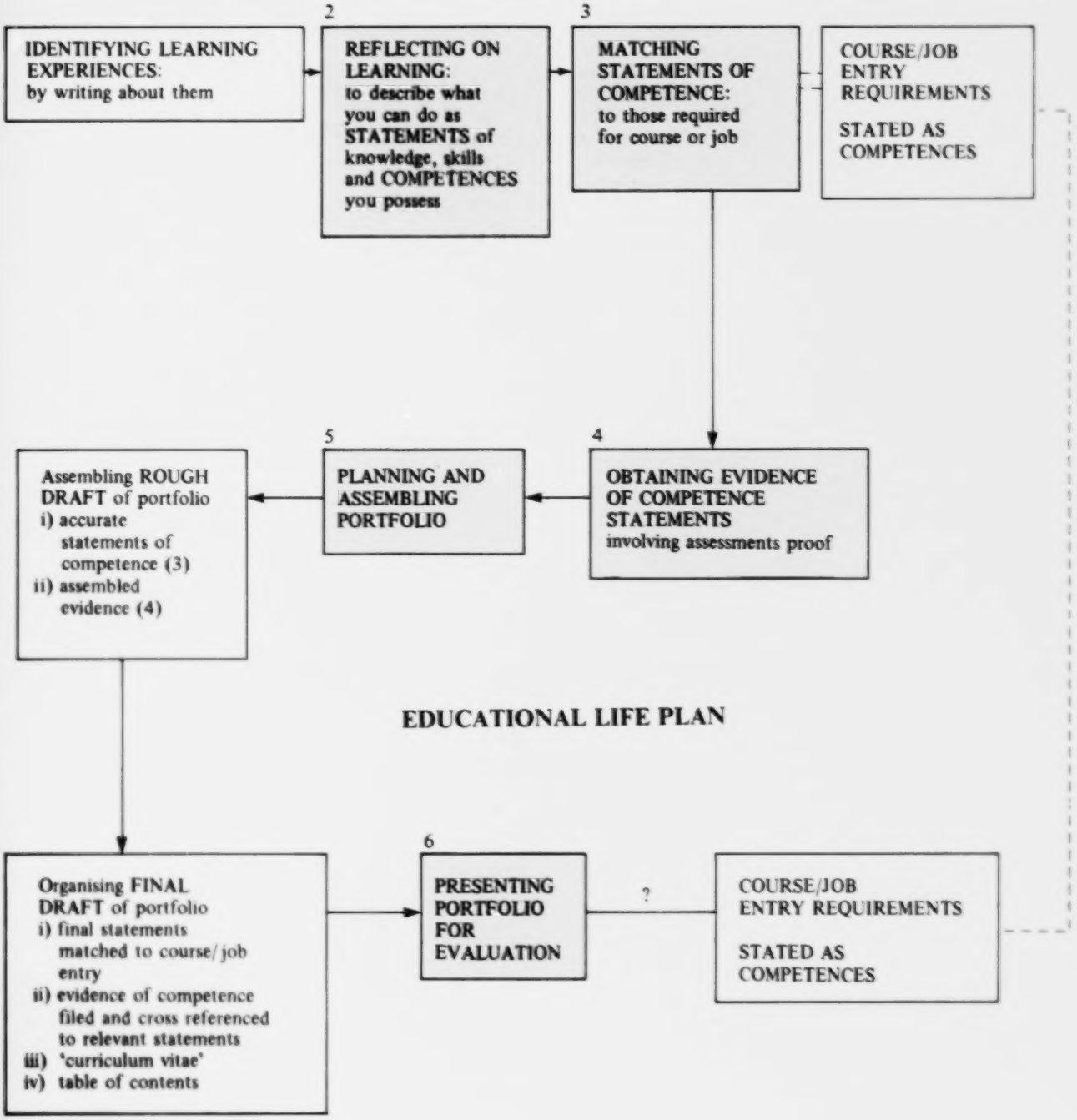
Offering APEL within a formally provided course offers one way of capitalising on the educational value of the work involved while getting the work properly funded. Another is to develop the idea of 'challenge' examinations. Yet another is to use APEL as a recruitment attraction, because it is a means of gaining academic credit and so shortening the period of study. More work needs to be done on refining interviewing techniques to identify and assess APEL.

How to conduct APEL reliably, while yet quickly and cheaply, remains the key question for each discipline. That quest could be an effective core for staff development towards practising APEL and without which it is not easy to see how APEL developments can be undertaken responsibly. For just as APEL can serve as a personal stocktaking for students, so it can serve as a ready reckoner as staff and institutions assess the quality and effectiveness of their service to older learners.

Finally, the academic staff whose collaboration made this project possible are agreed that the prime benefit of APEL for students lies in their having to put learning into practice. Thinking through, organising and presenting their case, making their claim to have mastered certain knowledge and skills, all this is excellent education.

Appendix 1

Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic—The stages of an accreditation of prior learning programme


IDENTIFYING LEARNING EXPERIENCES: by writing about them
2
REFLECTING ON LEARNING: to describe what you can do as STATEMENTS of knowledge, skills and COMPETENCES you possess
3
MATCHING STATEMENTS OF COMPETENCE: to those required for course or job
COURSE/JOB ENTRY REQUIREMENTS
STATED AS COMPETENCES
4
OBTAINING EVIDENCE OF COMPETENCE STATEMENTS involving assessments proof
5
PLANNING AND ASSEMBLING PORTFOLIO
Assembling ROUGH DRAFT of portfolio
i) accurate statements of competence (3)
ii) assembled evidence (4)
EDUCATIONAL LIFE PLAN
6
PRESENTING PORTFOLIO FOR EVALUATION
?
COURSE/JOB ENTRY REQUIREMENTS
STATED AS COMPETENCES
Organising FINAL DRAFT of portfolio
i) final statements matched to course/job entry
ii) evidence of competence filed and cross referenced to relevant statements
iii) 'curriculum vitae'
iv) table of contents

Appendix 2

Suggestions for standardised information

The only point of collecting information, whether standardised or not, is to facilitate the understanding of and interpretation of the story of the assessment of prior learning in each institution.

It is equally important to restrict information sought to a minimum to avoid irritating and unnecessary additional work.

Information could be organised as follows as a common format for each participating institution:

1. Course — title,
   status (qualification level, approved period, delegated authority),
   professional institutions and exemptions;

2. Students — size of groups,
   categories of those admitted,
   details of APEL customers, as age, sex, educational qualifications, work/life experience;

3. Procedures — Step by step account of the sequence followed from applications received to APEL concluded, including admission and point of entry and credit awarded;

4. Impact — on recruitment,
   on relations with employers,
   on academic colleagues and provision,
   on regulations, both institutional and CNAA,
   on students,
   on finance:
   - institutional,
   - personal/student,
   - LEA/DES/NAB,
   - employers.

Information under (1) can be provided at a point when APEL relates to any particular course or institution.

Information under (2) needs to run through the years 1985-86, 1986-87, 1987-88, as far as we can manage it.

Information under (3) needs logging from the point where APEL-related activities actually begin. Almost inevitably procedures will evolve over the two-year period of the CNAA/LET project. However, it will be important to be able to tell that development story. Hence logging as we go along.

Information under (4) is bound to be patchy, often accidental. Perhaps logging points as they arose under the various headings would be the best way of accumulating evidence for writing up at the end of the project.

Appendix 3

Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic—Extract from polytechnic 'associate student scheme' student handbook

7. *How can I make my past experience count?*

7.1 One of the newest and most exciting aspects of PASS is the potential to earn credit not just for course units studied but for what you have learned in the past inside or outside college. Adults acquire learning and skills from formal educational courses, but also from life experience including work, inservice training, voluntary and community activity, leisure interests, domestic responsibilities and travel. To be worthy of credit, past learning must be able to be shown to be at a level equivalent to that achieved within higher education.

7.2 There are currently 3 ways to claim credit for prior learning:

(a) by checking the value of previous qualifications against the tariff held by the Centre for Continuing Education and Training (CCET);

(b) by compiling a portfolio of prior learning for which you have no certification, which is submitted for assessment (guidance is available for this process by means of a group workshop and possibly by a distance learning pack in 1987-88—contact CCET);

(c) by following an in-house training course which your employer has had valued for credit within the polytechnic tariff.

No charge is made for (a) but a charge will be made to individuals in the case of (b) and to companies in the case of (c). The charge to individuals will be discounted against the registration fee when a programme of study is registered for an award. The process of assessing prior learning may be carried out before or during the period of enrolment for study at the polytechnic.

7.3 Credit for prior learning may normally count for up to 50% of the credit required for any award but will only be awarded where there is sufficient evidence to substantiate the claim.

Appendix 4

Essex Institute of Higher Education—MEd preparation and professional self-appraisal

Preliminary

Write a detailed curriculum vitae.

Task A

(i) List all inservice courses in education attended.

(ii) Take one course in your list of which you have a fairly vivid memory and describe what you learned from it and how this learning was stimulated. (*BEd Aim 1*)

(iii) Contrast this learning experience with another inservice course experience, ie one where either your learning process was very different or where you learned very little, and account for the difference. (*BEd Aims 1, 2*)

(iv) Describe a learning experience which took place *outside* a formal educational setting—what you learned, how you learned, and how you knew that you had learned something. (*BEd Aims 1, 2*)

Task B

Write an autobiography of your full-time education, describing the details of your experience as a learner, your experience of teachers and their teaching procedures.

(i) Focus your experience of education at ages *different* from the age groups you now teach. (*BEd Aims 1, 4*)

(ii) Focus on your experience of education at roughly the *same* age as the learners you now teach; consider your own experiences in relation to your assumptions about the attitudes and motives of those you currently teach. (*BEd Aim 1*)

Task C

Select an aspect of the educational process which is directly relevant to your current professional work and describe the detailed problems and the general issues which you perceive and feel concerned about. What sort of investigation can you envisage which would throw light on one (or some) of these problems and issues, and what difficulties you would expect to encounter if you attempted to implement such an investigation. (*BEd Aim 6*)

Task D

Read a recently published book related to your own professional specialisation and write a critical review of it, explaining the basis for your criticisms. If you find it difficult to establish a critical stance towards it, select another book about the same area which you find less convincing and write a comparison to bring out clearly your reasons for judging one more convincing than the other. (*BEd Aims 3, 5*)

Appendix 5

City of Birmingham Polytechnic

Briefing Paper—*Make your experience count toward the part-time degree*

We are currently operating a scheme whereby students may be able to gain exemptions on the BA Business Studies part-time degree through their previous experience.

Students should be able to prove that their experience matches the broad requirements of the unit for which they wish to gain exemption. This will be through the following:

1. **The preparation and presentation of a portfolio containing documentary evidence of experience ie**
   - **job descriptions**
   - **details of short courses**
   - **details of in-house courses**
   - **reports**
2. **An interview with members of staff to discuss your experience and portfolio.**

Appendix 6

Polytechnic of North London

These opportunities are first presented to applicants when they complete an application for the evening degree scheme. Section 6 of the application form reads:

Experience and skills

Much that is relevant to students' capacity to cope with evening degree study is gained outside formal courses.

Please write *briefly* on the following questions.

(a) Why do you wish to study?

(b) What skills, techniques and abilities have you developed through your experience of life and work?

(c) Which of these, if any, could have a bearing on studying in the evening degree scheme?

(d) Do you think that any of these skills, techniques or abilities match anything at degree level?

(e) In what further ways do you think you will need to develop in order to tackle evening degree study?

Appendix 7

City of Birmingham Polytechnic

Preparation of the portfolio—general guidelines

Details of expectations regarding the various sections of the portfolio are covered later in this document. The actual preparation and timing of the completion of the portfolio will be your responsibility.

It is intended that the technical sections of the portfolio be completed on an 'open book' basis, ie you may make use of any sources of information which appear to be appropriate. This would include any relevant text books, discussion of problems with academic staff at the polytechnic, or with informed staff at your work place.

It is assumed that if you decide to embark on the preparation of the portfolio, that you have a positive desire to proceed towards the study for the BEng degree. Consequently we will be interested, not only in the extent of your prior learning, but in whether you can develop competence in those areas in which weaknesses can be identified.

It must therefore be emphasised that whatever sources of information are used, and whatever consultations take place, the final portfolio must be produced as a result of YOUR efforts.

The final objective must be to convince the polytechnic that you are competent in and have an understanding of the areas identified hence leading to entry to, and/or exemptions from particular elements of the course.

Timetable

The preparation of answers to the various papers which will constitute part of the portfolio should be carried out in your own time, and at your own pace.

The completion date will depend on when you decide you would like to start the course. Prior to this date, assessment of your portfolio by staff at the polytechnic will be necessary, followed by a formal interview. In order that these assessments can be carried out properly, it is normally required that the portfolio should be complete, by the end of the second week of the June preceding the start of the course in the following September.

In the event of part, or all, of the portfolio being considered to be unsatisfactory, remedial work will be advised. This will involve another submission, which may consequently delay the date on which enrolment to the degree course can take place.

It is therefore in your interests to submit the portfolio at an early date to avoid such complications.

Appendix 8

Sheffield City Polytechnic

Business studies manual

Guidelines for Evaluators of portfolios of prior learning

1. The function of an Evaluator is to make an academic judgement, alone or in conjunction with others, upon a portfolio of prior experiential learning prepared by a student or potential student.

   The judgement will relate to the award, on the basis of the portfolio, of access to a course, or exemption or credit on a course, or access with exemption or credit.

2. It is important to appreciate that each portfolio is the product of an extended and rigorous process involving a systematic reflection on and analysis of prior experiences of various kinds by the individual concerned.

3. More often than not, the individual has chosen to seek access, exemption or credit on the basis of learning gained from experience because he/she lacks appropriate formal qualifications.

   The process has therefore been designed to assist in developing study and communication skills where appropriate, particularly since these may have been undeveloped or stale in the individuals concerned. This has been achieved by ensuring that each individual carries out a variety of tasks at each stage in the process. These tasks are set out in self-guidance materials which each individual has used.

4. Each individual has had a member of the academic staff as an Adviser. The role of the Adviser is that of 'facilitator' or 'counsellor'. The Adviser's main functions are:

   — to assist by explaining the process where necessary;

   — to guide through the various stages;

   — to act as a 'broker' with admissions tutors, subject specialists or employers in order to clarify aspects of learning checklists, syllabuses and other demands/requirements of the polytechnic.

   It is not part of the role of the Adviser to 'push' the individual through the process, nor to pressure in any way. But he/she will answer queries about the process and will prompt with questions if he/she feels it is necessary.

   Advisers will not be involved in the evaluation of portfolios prepared by persons whom they have advised.

5. Each portfolio has been prepared with a particular objective in mind. This should be stated at the beginning of the portfolio. Each portfolio should be judged in relation to its objective.

   Each individual will have attempted to direct his/her portfolio to achieving the desired objective by meeting the demands of an appropriate 'checklist' which sets out what is required of applicants seeking admission to a course, or the demands of a syllabus where the objective is to gain a specific credit or exemption.

   It is important to determine whether and to what extent the appropriate requirements are met by the learning claims in the portfolio and by the evidence given in support of those claims.

6. However, bear in mind that the portfolio should also be judged as a whole and that general descriptions of learning experiences, the nature and extent of the evidence supplied, and the overall organisation of the portfolio may well be as significant as specific learning claims.

7. In addition, consideration should be given to such questions as:

   — is the portfolio effectively presented?

   — is the case put by the portfolio clear, concise and well-argued and convincing?

8. Check that the evidence supports the learning which is claimed. Wherever possible, the evidence provided should be direct (ie in a form which the claimant has produced using the skills/knowledge claimed) rather than indirect (ie from some source other than the claimant). But it is important to appreciate that it can take a variety of forms.

9. Where a claim to learning cannot be supported by direct or indirect evidence, the claimant may suggest means of providing evidence eg by offering to undergo some form of test, interview, etc.

   An evaluator may or may not feel that this is necessary, or may wish to impose his/her methods of testing the learning claimed.

10. In the last analysis the evaluator retains the right to be satisfied as to the validity of the learning claims in whatever way he/she feels is necessary.

11. In normal circumstances, at least two evaluators will pass judgement on a portfolio. Wherever possible, an agreed decision should be arrived at. If this is not possible, a third evaluation will be sought and the decision of the majority will prevail.

The decision of the evaluator/s may be one of the following:

- the award of access/credit/exemption.
- the award of access/credit, conditional upon completing a programme of work, eg reading, exercises, a study skills course.
- a request for further evidence, eg more precise documentation, an oral interview, completion of a test or simulation exercise.
- refusal of access/credit/exemption, with or without recommendations.

If a specific credit is awarded, then a grade/mark in the subject should be given.

Appendix 9

Middlesex Polytechnic

Board of Studies Formal Paper—*Assessment of prior learning for accreditation*

1. In the past, preaccreditation has been given for successful completion of formal studies at degree level. The normal maximum is five units for one full-year or more of study with proportional amounts for lesser periods. The credits are allocated where possible to areas of study on the Diploma.

2. There is increasing appreciation of the fact that academic learning does not only occur within the walls of an academic institution or even as a result of a specially prepared package of distance-learning material, but can occur in a wide variety of situations. Therefore, in future, Diploma students who, though they have not completed formal degree level studies, have completed substantial relevant work experience, professional training or independent study may apply for preaccreditation.

3. Applications should normally be made within one month of joining the course. Applications will be considered where the student can demonstrate the following:

   3.1 substantial learning as a result of prior experience;

   3.2 a degree of theoretical understanding of underlying concepts and issues;

   3.3 familiarity with the literature of the subject as appropriate.

4. The student will be required:

   4.1 to attend a series of 'prior learning' seminars designed to assist the student in constructing a proposal. The seminar tutor will act as an advocate to help the student make the best possible presentation;

   4.2 to compile a substantial proposal detailing the nature of the learning experience, the extent of understanding and competence achieved, and the relevant literature with which the student is familiar. The proposal may also contain independent corroboration from employers, co-workers, etc.

5. Assessment of the proposal will be by two independent assessors (ie not the seminar tutor), normally the relevant set co-ordinator and his/her nominee.

   5.1 the quality of the learning achieved;

   5.2 the degree of theoretical understanding shown;

   5.3 the degree of familiarity with the literature of the subject as appropriate;

   5.4 the corroborative evidence of employers, co-workers, etc;

   5.5 the evidence of a *viva voce* examination of the student.

   The assessor may also set written work or test skill acquisition where appropriate.

   The assessor will judge the number of credits to be awarded in relation to the degree of learning and understanding normally achieved on a Diploma unit to a maximum of five units, and the areas of study (where appropriate) to which these credits should be allocated.

   The assessors' recommendations will go to the board of examiners for formal ratification.

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